Writers as Resource: A Capabilities Perspective on the American Television Industry

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In the early decades of American television, writers worked in relative obscurity while the actors who spoke their words became household names. Most writers were on contract, writing individual scripts but not contributing ideas for new TV series – that was the job of studio executives. According to Jeff Melvoin,[1] this situation changed with the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* as production companies, like MTM, gave more creative freedom to the writers – and influence over the production of their scripts. In the 1970s and '80s powerhouse writer-producers (showrunners) like Norman Lear, Stephen J. Cannell, and Steven Bochco paved the way for a sea change in the way audiences, networks and studios value the work of writers.

Meanwhile, competition in the American TV industry was increasing with the addition of a 4th broadcast network (Fox), cable television, satellite delivery services, and, more recently, internet streaming[2]. Audiences became fragmented and the adage, "content is king" rang truer than ever. Better content (and more of it) brings audiences to the screen. But television studios aren't just competing for viewers in this new competitive landscape – they are competing for the creative talent that produces the shows that attract those viewers.   Enter, the "celebrity showrunner."

This paper analyzes the emergence of the showrunner as economic resource in television organizations and the rise of these writers to celebrity status. Using a capabilities approach, the author argues that their economic value to studios goes beyond their skills as

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[1] Quoted in Hong, C.Y., When Did People Start Saying 'Showrunner", Slate, October 14, 2011
[2] I use the term "television" to encompass broadcast and cable networks, satellite services, and internet streaming (e.g., Netflix)

writers: they bring proven ability to attract audiences, the specific knowledge necessary to launch and maintain a series, and the network of writers from which to choose a successful writers' room. The showrunner has become even more essential with changes in the television production process brought about by services like Netflix, Amazon and HULU. In the world of streaming, the old pilot season is no longer the norm. Instead, these new studios produce one short season of a new series and make their judgements based on these episodes. This raises the question: what are the capabilities showrunners need in the next era of television?